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HEADLINE: With government's help, firm builds better 'P' trap

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BODY:

The Frost Co. has found a better way to build the tubular "P" trap, that connection of drain pipes found under millions of sinks, and a mainstay of the company's plumbing products business.

Cellular manufacturing has been the answer, where less is emphasized over more in the production process.

Machines no longer are set up to knock out 5,000-10,000 parts in a single run. An average run now is 250.

John Frost Jr., company president, said the Trade Adjustment Assistance program offered through the United States Department of Commerce is responsible for the advancement.

"We believe this cell, for the tubular 'P' trap, will make us the low-cost producer in what has become a world market," he said. "This will help us get some new business. We can be more flexible to customer requests."

The tubular trap represents 20 percent of the company's sales of plumbing products.

The Frost Co. turned to the TAA program in 1989 when the company's sales of plumbing parts dropped 28 percent. Approximately 20 employees had to be laid off.

A reduction in new home construction nationally from 2 million annual units to about half that number, also turned off Frost Co. markets.

"We're still going through the process of digging out from those problems," Frost said.

TAA was created under the federal Trade Acts of 1974 and 1986 to help U.S. companies cope with the effects of reduced import duties on foreign-manufactured goods.

Frost had to demonstrate how much foreign competition had hurt the family business, which was founded by his great-great-grandfather Charles N. Frost in

1902.

Once eligibility for the program was established, Applied Strategies International, Chicago, was assigned to assist the Frost Co. in improving marketing, assessing the plant and manufacturing equipment at 6523 14th Ave., and in upgrading computer operations.

Applied Strategies manages the Midwest Trade Adjustment Center in Chicago.

"All of those three areas were beneficial," Frost said. "But the equipment survey was probably the most beneficial.

"We found out that a lot of the equipment we have, even though it is older, is equal to or above the productivity level of new equipment."

Ten percent of the company's equipment has been swapped or sold based on the survey recommendations.

The Frost Co. paid approximately \$ 30,000 for the consulting work, or about 35 cents on the dollar of the total cost.

"TAA has definitely been a support for us to continue," Frost said. "It has helped us identify our long-term goals and focus our lines.

"That's a nice way of saying, we're cutting out the dead wood."

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